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SUBJECT: Peru's Evangelicals: A Rising Force

REF: Religious Freedom Report 2004

1. (SBU) This is the first in a three-part series on Peru's Evangelical Christians. This cable traces the recent history of this key emerging sector. The second will delineate the Evangelicals' political strategy for the upcoming presidential and congressional elections. The final cable will point to outreach possibilities and speak to Peruvian Evangelical Christians' potential as USG allies on narcotics, trafficking in persons, and in countering anti-Americanism.

Summary:

2. (U) Peru's growing Evangelical Christian Community could be an important factor in the upcoming presidential elections. Over the last twenty years, this highly diverse community has grown from 1-2 percent of the population to 10-15 percent today. Peru's Evangelicals have already made a strong, though not sustained, impact on Peruvian politics. They participated in the defeat of Sendero Luminoso (SL), helped transform Alberto Fujimori from a long-shot candidate into Peru's President in 1990, and, more recently, provided a counterweight to Nelson Palomino's cocalero movement in the Apurimac River Valley. Since the early 90s, when Evangelical Christians provided key support to Fujimori, their numbers, levels of organization, and social reach have increased. End Summary.

Evangelicals: Two Decades of Growth

3. (U) Over the last twenty years, Peru's Evangelical Christian community has grown rapidly, from an estimated 1-2 percent of the population to 10-15 percent today. Peru's Evangelicals are enormously diverse. The Union of Evangelical Churches (UNICEP), one umbrella organization, represents over 7,000 churches with 600,000 members.

4. (SBU) Poloff recently discussed the Evangelicals' potential influence in the upcoming presidential and congressional elections with a wide variety of contacts within the movement, including:

-Robert Barriger. An American Citizen, Barriger is the President of UNICEP and founder of the 12,000 member, Lima-based "Road to Life" (Camino de Vida) Church.

-Humberto Lay Sun. A Peruvian architect of Chinese descent, Lay Sun is the founder and leader of the 20,000-member Emmanuel Church. He is also an announced presidential candidate.

-Peter Hornung. Hornung is a successful businessman who leads the 50,000-member Agua Viva Church in Lima. Hornung is also a presidential candidate, though it remains unclear if he has a viable party behind him.

-Cesar Castellanos. Founder and leader of the 300,000 strong "Road to Destiny" Church in Colombia, Castellanos' Church is closely allied with Hornung's. Reportedly, Castellanos also enjoys close ties to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe. (Castellanos' wife is Colombia's Ambassador to Brazil.) Castellanos recently preached to Promise-Keepers style meeting of 15-20,000 men in Lima.

-Walter Alejos. The only Evangelical member of the Peruvian Congress, Alejos is a former professor at the University of Huamanga in Ayacucho (where he knew personally Abimael Guzman) and former Director of the NGO World Vision in Peru.

5. (U) Poloff also discussed Evangelical Christians' relationship to experts in other sectors. SL scholars Carlos Tapia and Ponciano del Pino described the Evangelical

Christians role in turning back Sendero in the Apurimac River Valley, and sociologist Jaime Antezano laid out the recent history of the Evangelicals' strong ideological divergences with the Cocaleros of that same region.

From Countryside to City

16. (U) Historically, Peru had a small Protestant community. Evangelical Christians figured among them, but, until the 1980s, they had confined their conversion efforts to rural areas, working with the poor. Their preaching urged people to withdraw from an immoral society and practice faith in a private way. These conditions changed dramatically in the 1980s as the Sendero Luminoso terrorist campaign sent desperate campesinos streaming into the cities. At the same time, the urban churches began to convert more members of the middle class, giving the community far more potential political leverage.

Grassroots Appeal

17. The reasons for the fast growth of the Evangelical Churches became evident during a recent series of visits Poloff made to Robert Barriger's Road to Life Church. The Church's message is individualistic, positive, and relevant to many Peruvians, particularly to formerly middle class persons battered by the economic difficulties of the 80s-90s, and to upwardly mobile rural immigrants to the cities. Both in preaching and in teaching, Road to Life emphasizes self-improvement and family reinforcement. Road to Life offers an array of workshops on family issues, particularly on the responsibilities of men (similar to Promise Keepers in the U.S.). The Church provides a social safety net for members, maintaining a list of low-cost doctors. Finally, Road to Life runs its own social programs, including a home for street children in Ayacucho and a highly successful program - with U.S. partners - to distribute low-cost wheelchairs to handicapped and impoverished Peruvians.

The "Holy War" Against Sendero

18. (U) Evangelical Christians in the Apurimac River Valley took a lead role in fighting off Sendero Luminoso. The Valley was important to SL for the way it linked Ayacucho, Sendero's original base area, and the Ene River, a jungle region where SL remnants still exist. Peruvian scholar Ponciano del Pino describes the Apurimac River Evangelicals' transformation from pacifist believers into holy warriors in a 1995 Spanish-language article, "Times of War and Gods: Ronderos, Evangelicals, and Senderistas in the Apurimac River Valley."

19. (U) When SL first entered the Valley in 1982, Evangelical Christians refused to take part in violent actions against the state. In response, Sendero began killing evangelical leaders and drove all established religious authorities, Catholic and Protestant, out of the area. Abandoned by "professional" religious authorities (pastors and missionaries), del Pino relates, the Indian peasants of the Apurimac River Valley interpreted their situation in apocalyptic Biblical terms. Desperate conditions promoted a surge in conversions. Many Evangelicals concluded that Sendero represented the anti-Christ and so eagerly provided much of the manpower for the self-defense committees (ronderos) that ultimately defeated the SL terrorists.

Key Support for Fujimori

10. (U) Evangelical Christians made their next impact on Peruvian politics in 1990, when they helped transform candidate Alberto Fujimori from long-shot outsider into President. Carlos Bustamante, a self-made millionaire and an important Evangelical leader, became an early Fujimori backer. Fujimori then picked a prominent Evangelical, Carlos Garcia, to be his running mate. Trained in outreach, Evangelicals proved to be expert fund-raisers for the Japanese-Peruvian candidate.

11. (SBU) The alliance with Fujimori proved a bitter experience, one that is keenly remembered by Peru's contemporary evangelical leaders. After his election, Fujimori turned his back on his Evangelical supporters. In addition, the Evangelicals who served in his government and those elected to Congress turned in a disappointing performances. Some became involved in the scandals of the era. Others, according to contemporary Evangelical Congressman Walter Alejos, had no idea how to go about the

day-to-day horse-trading that is congressional politics. Alejos recounts how some of the 17 Evangelical Congressmen who entered with Fujimori tried to convert other Congress members during legislative sessions, a practice that puzzled veteran politicians. Contemporary Evangelical leaders stress that to influence politics, the movement needs to develop a cadre of politically savvy, effective leaders.

Countering Cocaleros: Reaction to "the Sacred Leaf"

12. (U) The final Evangelical Christian incursion into politics has occurred recently. Since 2000, the Evangelicals in the Apurimac River Valley, motivated by religious and ideological convictions, have proven to be counterweight to the Cocaleros, according to rural sociologist and cocalero expert Jaime Antezano. Antezano said that in the 1985-1990 period when coca production surged, the Evangelicals ignored the issue of cultivation (though drug usage was discouraged among church members). During the 1995-2000 period, when coca production dropped dramatically, many farmers abandoned the crop, removing any potential conflict between the area's Christians and coca.

13. (U) Coca production began a comeback in the Valley in 2000. Two years later, Cocalero leader Nelson Palomino appeared on the scene and created the cocalero Federation of Agricultural Producers of the Apurimac River Valley and the VRAE (FEPAVRAE). Palomino proclaimed that coca was "a sacred leaf" and wrapped his ideas in a glorification of the Inca Empire. According to Antezano, the description of coca as "sacred" and Palomino's quasi-religious references to "sacred" Inca past proved deeply offensive to evangelical Christians.

14. (U) In response, Evangelical Christian farmers in the southern part of the Valley formed their own Association of Evangelical Producers (AEP) as a counterweight to Palomino's group. AEP's leader, Andres Allcca, publicly stepped forward and called coca "the damned leaf" and, according to Antezano, many Evangelicals began to eradicate their own coca plants. Antezano added that for unknown reasons, the opposition to coca moderated in the beginning of 2003, with Allcca adopting a lower profile. Antezano noted that recently anti-coca militancy among Evangelicals was on the rise. He cited a recent AEP Congress in Lima where Evangelical farmers, threatened by the re-emergence of Coca and renewed incursions of narcotraffickers, came out against coca cultivation.

Comment:

15. (SBU) In the last three decades, Evangelicals' membership has gone from rural to urban, from mostly poor to increasingly middle class. Evangelicals have excellent grassroots networks throughout the country and ties to key groups in the U.S. They agree with the U.S. on a number of key issues, including narcotics, terrorism, trafficking in persons, and religious freedom. As Peru continues to experience a strong wave of Christian revivalism, the USG would be remiss to not pay close attention to this emerging force.

Struble